DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 875 RC 022 347

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TITLE	Hispanic Deaf Students in Rural Education Settings: Complex Issues.
PUB DATE	2000-03-10
NOTE	6p.; In: Capitalizing on Leadership in Rural Special Education: Making a Difference for Children and Families. Conference Proceedings (Alexandria, VA, March 16-18, 2000); see RC 022 337.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cultural Influences; *Deafness; *Educational Diagnosis; Elementary Secondary Education; *Family School Relationship; *Hispanic American Students; *Language Dominance; Language Usage; Minority Group Children; Rural Education; *Special Education; Student Placement

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews issues surrounding Hispanic students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Research indicates that Hispanic deaf and hard of hearing students generally have lower academic success than their deaf or hearing peers. In addition, they are more likely to drop out of school or be tracked into vocational programs and less likely to attend college. The most prominent characteristic of Hispanic deaf students is language option and choice. Language options include spoken English or Spanish, various sign languages, or an invented system of home signs. Cultural considerations are also important. Hispanics are family-oriented, mothers and fathers often follow traditional roles, and strong religious beliefs may influence family attitudes toward disabilities. Evaluation teams must collect sufficient data on the student's language use at home to ensure learning in school. The evaluation team should include family members, an audiologist, a speech-language pathologist, an ESL/bilingual teacher, a teacher of the deaf, a general educator, Spanish and sign language interpreters, and paraprofessionals. School personnel must encourage families to participate and take specific steps to avoid communication barriers and breakdowns. A comprehensive naturalistic assessment will provide a wealth of information for academic placement and social support. Rural school districts may pool resources to form a regional assessment team and regional learning centers. (Contains 19 references.) (SV)

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HISPANIC DEAF STUDENTS IN RURAL EDUCATION SETTINGS: COMPLEX ISSUES

This presentation provides an overview of the issues surrounding Hispanic students who are deaf and/or hard of hearing in rural educational settings. While the needs of Hispanic students who are deaf/hard of hearing are not limited to the rural setting, the number of students and resources available in a rural setting demand a different approach to assessment and instruction.

Demographic Changes in Hispanic Populations

The number of minority students in public schools documents the rapidly changing population of the United States. MacNeil (1990) has reported "Anglo" students now constitute the minority in several states, with other states close behind. The Hispanic population is the largest and fastest growing (Figueroa, Fradd & Correa, 1989). The term "Hispanic" has arisen in the literature in the past few years, but may still be misunderstood by the general population. The United States Bureau of Census has defined a Hispanic individual as an individual of Spanish background. However, Hispanics can come from any race. Individuals who are Asian, white, or black can all be Hispanics if their language background is Spanish… To say that Hispanics have one culture would be a simplification of that definition because Hispanics encompass a variety of cultures, just as they come from a variety of races. Hispanics then, is a broad term used for convenience to identify individuals who come from Spanish heritage and may or may not use Spanish as the language of the home (Kayser, 1998, p. 157).

Following the national demographic shift, proportionately, the number of Hispanic students who are deaf or hard of hearing is also increasing (Walker-Vann, 1998). This fact may be alarming when one notes the research that has shown these students have disproportionately greater amounts of difficulty in school (Bennett, 1988).

The Deaf Hispanic Child

The Deaf Hispanic child is a student who is choosing a language and a culture with which to identify. Is this child Deaf first and Hispanic second? Or is the child Hispanic first and Deaf second? These questions require a careful consideration when working with families of students who are both Hispanic and also Deaf/hard of hearing.

It has been argued that "double minority students may face double prejudice in education" (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996, p. 164). It has also been shown that "Deaf children from non-English speaking families are three to four times more likely to be labeled learning disabled, mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed" (Lane et al., 1996, p. 164). Research has demonstrated Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing students generally have achieved lower academic success than their hearing or deaf peers. Additionally, "they are more likely to drop out of high school or to be tracked into vocational rather than academic programs. Those who finish high school are less likely to go on to college" (Lane et al., 1996, p. 164). The drop out rate of students who are both Hispanic and Deaf is thirty-six percent (Lane et al., 1996).

Language Options

Of the many factors that may influence the education of a student who is deaf/hard of hearing, none is so critical as language. As a group, "Hispanic Deaf children are less likely than white Deaf children to have a sign language used at home. Therefore, they have less opportunities for communication" (Lane et al., 1996, p. 164). The Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing student and her family is ultimately involved in several language choices and

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options, both expressively and receptively. The choice of the family or the student may not be at all what the school expects.

The Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing student has several language options from which to choose, both oral and signed. She may use spoken Spanish or spoken English, signed language, including American Sign Language (ASL), Signed English systems, or sign language from the student's native country. Additionally, a student may have minimal formal language skills (Lane et al., 1996) or use an invented system of home signs. Lane et al., described home signs as "gestural communication" (1996, p. 39). They continued, "the functional use of home gestures can range from simple pointing at objects and acting out messages, to a repertoire of agreed-upon gestures that convey a much more extensive range of communication" (Lane et al., 1996, p. 41). The use of each of these language options, individually and in combination with one another, must be carefully documented and explored in order to determine which language the student prefers to use, and where the student's language competencies are found. Schools should not assume that a particular language or system is being used by the Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing student, but rather the student may be using a variety of options to communicate, depending on the context, content, and environment.

The family and school of a Hispanic student who is deaf/hard of hearing must decide which, if any of the languages available to the student is the primary and preferred mode of communication. Schools' views of hard of hearing and profoundly deaf children from linguistically diverse families may be oversimplified. Schools may expect the hard of hearing child to speak the home language to some extent. In-school assessments may not reveal the extent of the child's knowledge of that language. Previous studies have indicated that deaf and hard of hearing children may in fact not demonstrate any knowledge of the home language in the school environment, where only sign language and English are used (Gernar de Garcia, 1995).

Cultural Considerations

In addition to language choice, schools and individuals who work with students who are Hispanic and deaf/hard of hearing must also consider cultural and linguistic variations among the students with whom they work. School professionals need to be knowledgeable and sensitive to language dialects, family and religious beliefs, family values, and immigrant status. It is important to remember that "like any other group of people, Hispanics have various ideas, values, and beliefs that may be different from those of others sharing the culture. Diversity is the most common shared attribute" (Gonzalez Alvarez, 1998, p. 73). One of the most important considerations school professionals should remember is that not all Spanish is the same. Idioms, vocabulary, and dialects vary from country to country and within countries.

Hispanics are family-oriented. Households often consist of immediate and extended family members because "staying together and helping each other are two very important values" (Gonzalez Alvarez, 1998, p. 74). Traditionally, in Hispanic cultures, mothers are the main caregivers and fathers are the primary providers and decision makers of the family.

Religion is another important cultural characteristic of many Hispanic families. While religion is practiced daily, many Hispanic families turn to their religion and their church in moments of crisis. Religious beliefs have greatly influenced Hispanic's attitudes toward children with disabilities (Gonzalez Alvarez, 1998). It has been demonstrated that there are generally two points of views that are believed about children with disabilities. "In the first view, a child with a disability is seen as a punishment or curse" (Gonzalez Alvarez, 1998, p. 74). For example, the child's disability is a punishment for something someone in the family did wrong. In the second view, the family "believe(s) that there is a purpose for their child's disability" (Gonzalez Alvarez, 1998, p. 74). Understanding the view the parents and family have, of a student with a hearing loss, will assist in understanding the role of the family in the educational process and how to encourage the family to support the student's education.

Educational Concerns and Recommendations

In order to accurately assess the language(s) the Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing student is using and to determine the most appropriate academic placement, schools need to establish evaluation/assessment teams. Ideally each member of the team would be fluent in Spanish and culturally knowledgeable. Table 1 outlines some important members of the evaluation team.

Table 1: Evaluation team members

Immediate and extended family members
Audiologist
Speech-Language Pathologist
ESL/Bilingual Teacher
Teacher of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing
General Educator
Sign Language Interpreter
Spanish Interpreter
Paraprofessionals

Family members should feel comfortable to participate as team members. However, this relationship may not happen naturally and therefore must be nurtured by school professionals. Many Hispanic families "regard professionals as the experts, the ones who have all the knowledge" (Gonzalez Alvarez, 1998, p. 76). Families may rely on school professionals for advice and to make decisions regarding placement and individual educational (IEP) goals. School professionals need to encourage families to participate by inviting them to share their thoughts and feelings and by assuring them that the teacher/professional will not be offended or hurt if the family disagrees with the schools thoughts, ideas, or recommendations. Additionally, school personal should provide support to the family by validating what the family is doing and by recognizing their individual needs.

School personal can foster this partnership/relationship if they are accessible to the family and flexible with traditional ideas and school procedures. It is also important to remember that relationships are built on trust and communication. If a parent or family member has no way to contact a teacher or other school professional because of language differences, there will be no communication. Identifying a specific person as the contact for a family will help to prevent communication barriers and breakdowns. If school professionals are unable to communicate with the family interpreters should be used to facilitate communication. Interpreters must be familiar with specific terminology surrounding issues of hearing loss and education, as well as the individual language preference(s) of the families of children with hearing loss.

Evaluation of the student requires each member of the team to be aware of the student's and family's strengths and areas of concern. It is critical to remember that school-based assessments will likely yield limited results. Members of the team should be careful that tests are appropriate for the language(s) of the student. Additionally team members should keep in mind that "Deaf students are seriously disadvantaged in psychological and achievement testing because of the English-language and cultural bias of the tests; Hispanic Deaf students are doubly disadvantaged" (Lane et al., p. 164).

Evaluation teams need to be equipped to conduct comprehensive assessments of the Hispanic student who is deaf/hard of hearing in order to determine the most appropriate placement for the student and to ensure scholastic and social success for the student and her family (Christensen & Delgado, 1993; Fletcher-Carter & Paez, 1997; Rodriguez & Santiviago, 1991). A comprehensive, naturalistic assessment will provide school personal with a wealth of knowledge about the individual student. A person who has knowledge in each of the languages involved is integral to the assessment. However these individuals are not always readily available in rural areas. For this reason, rural school districts should work together to create a team of professionals who are knowledgeable in the areas of deafness and bilingual education to administer the comprehensive assessment. Observations, interviews, language samples, anecdotal records, appropriate psychological evaluations,

audiological evaluations, and academic evaluations should be collected and used to determine the most appropriate placement for the Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing student.

A variety of factors will influence the academic placement of the Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing student. Degree of hearing loss, knowledge and use of spoken or signed languages, appropriate peers, and teaching expertise will greatly influence the team's decision for academic placement and social support. Individual rural districts may not be equipped to provide the most appropriate educational option for the student. When possible, school districts may try to work together to provide the most beneficial academic and social environment for the student.

Conclusion

This presentation has provided an overview of the issues surrounding Hispanic students who are deaf/hard of hearing. Research has demonstrated Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing students generally have lower academic success than their hearing or deaf peers. Of the various unique characteristics of Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing students, the most prominent is language option and choice. Evaluation teams must collect sufficient data to demonstrate the student's language preference and use to insure learning in the school environment. School districts may decide to pool resources to establish a regional assessment team to determine the academic and social needs of each individual Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing student. Furthermore, school districts may develop regional learning centers to provide quality instruction and support to Hispanic deaf/hard of hearing students and their families.

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